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Graduate Council

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Graduate Council Minutes - March 24, 2022

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

March 24, 2022

Members present: Ohnesorg, S (Chair), Alshibli, K., Aydeniz, M., Baxter, T., Dittmann, P., Dzikus, L., Ekici, K., Finotti, L., Fleming-May, R., Gerhold, R., Griffin, M., Hammock, H. (Graduate Student Senate President), Hines, M., King, L., Kotowski, M., Lang, M., Lim, J., Mannik, J., Meschke, L. (Chair-Elect), Mohsin, M., Neal, A., Newkirk, K., Ownley, B., Palies, P. (UTSI), Preuss, N., Sachs, A., Schmidt, H., Thompson, P., Ward, M.

Ex-Officio members present: Bradberry, S., Broemmel, A., Gordon, K., Kilic, O., Lane, I., Mercer, H., Moore, T., Sullivan, M., Thompson, D., Cox, C.

1. **Call to Order and Welcome** (Stefanie Ohnesorg)

The Graduate Council Zoom meeting was called to order by Chair, Stefanie Ohnesorg on Thursday, March 24, 2022, at 3:00 p.m.

2. **Minutes of the Preceding Meeting**

The February 17, 2022, Graduate Council Minutes were approved electronically on March 20, 2022.

3. **Committee Reports**

We will now have our committee reports.

➤ **Academic Policy Committee** (Lars Dzikus, co-chair) – No meeting, no report.

➤ **Appeals Committee (Laurie Meschke, chair)**

No appeals to report.

➤ **Curriculum Committee** (A. Sachs, chair) – No scheduled meeting, no report.

➤ **Student Faculty Research Awards (Dixie Thompson, chair)**

We tried a new review process this semester and it seemed to work well. The committee agreed to move forward with the new system.

There was additional money this year to fund the Student/Faculty Research Awards. With that, I have good news. We had 23 SFRA applications submitted for spring, and we were able to fund all 23 applications. Six colleges/units were represented.

My thanks to the faculty for guiding their students through this process. And my thanks and appreciation to the committee members for their time in reviewing the applications.

We looked at a 3-year report of the Student Faculty Research Awards and found that the submission numbers were about the same for both semesters. With that information, the recommendation is to again have submissions for fall and spring.

4. **Administrative Reports and Announcements:**

Deans Update: (Dixie Thompson)

- The Curriculog implementation is moving forward. Curriculog is the software platform that we will use to review and approve curricular proposals in the years ahead. The implementation team has representation from the both the Graduate and Undergraduate Council. That charge meeting will be next week. This new platform will change the work of the Curriculum Committee – reviews will still happen with decisions to approve or not approve. The main difference is that we will review proposals by an electronic document instead of submitting word documents and/or PDF's.
- I want to remind everyone that the Graduate and Professional Student Appreciation Week is April 4-8. I hope your unit has made plans to celebrate these students and their achievements. We will send a list of the offices across campus that have activities planned for GPSAW week. A couple of events to mention: 1) the 3MT watch party is April 6, at 3:30 and 2) there is a 5K on Saturday, April 9 and this is for walkers or runners. The money raised from the 5K will go to support both Big Orange Pantry and other GSS initiatives.
- Fall Orientations: I want to communicate the dates of our fall orientations. Wednesday, August 17, 8:30 – 3:00 p.m., will be the New Graduate Student Orientation and Thursday, August 18, 8:30 – 3:00 will be the New GTA Orientation. Both will be virtual events, as they have proven to be very successful. Please share these dates with your departments so that your department will not schedule a conflicting event on the same date and time. It is very important that our new students attend our orientations because we have key speakers from various offices with helpful information for these new students. A fun event also planned for that week is our Community Fair. The Community Fair will be Friday, August 19, from 11:00 – 1:00 on the Pedestrian Parkway. Various offices from across campus will have tables set up. This gives the students an opportunity to ask questions, get helpful information, SWAG, and other goodies from the offices they saw virtually at the orientations.
- Graduate Student Survey.

Back in fall 2020, we sent a survey to our graduate and professional students asking how they were doing. If you remember in fall 2020, many things were happening. We were in the pandemic with no vaccines yet available, our classes were online, there was hardly anyone on campus, the murder of George Floyd had been just a few months before, and we were facing a very divisive presidential election. This was a stressful time. So, we sent a survey to ask our students how they were doing.

We determined spring 2022, would be a good time to repeat our survey. To see how things had changed for our students since fall 2020. Like fall 2020, we had 3 questions and I would like to share the results.

Question 1: Which of these statements best describes how you are handling the stresses of this semester?

- I'm doing fine
- I'm managing, but it's stressful
- I'm struggling

Results: I'm doing fine – 17%. I'm managing, but it's stressful – 58%. I'm struggling – 25%.

To my surprise, the percentage that said, "I'm struggling" is actually higher than the 2020 percentage. In fall 2020, the percentage that said, "I'm struggling" was 18%.

I shared this information in a meeting with the provost and vice provosts, Andrew Williams (Vice Provost for Student Success) who works with undergraduate students has been monitoring stress levels for undergraduates and reported the same results – students are feeling more stress now.

Of the 1,100 students that took the survey, I think it is important to recognize that, yes, 75 percent of our students reported they are doing okay. But 25 percent of our students say they are struggling. Please be mindful while you are working with students that some may need extra assistance. And remember that 974-HELP should be your first call if you see a student struggling. That office is set up to help and assist those students who are having difficulty.

Question 2: Ask students about the different stressors they are facing. Answer options: not stressful, somewhat stressful, moderately stressful, very stressful, or extremely stressful.

Results: Over one-third of our students (35%) answered financial pressures were either very stressful or extremely stressful. When we issued this survey in 2020, financial issues were not one of the top stressors. The top stressors in 2020 were family and personal issues, social isolation, and lack of interaction with professors and peers. Now, financial issues have risen to the top. Family and personal issues was the second stressor at 24%.

As I have shared these results with others, one of the issues that comes up is the current housing situation in Knoxville and the cost of housing. Currently, it is difficult to find housing in Knoxville – especially affordable housing. This is a stressor right now for both our undergraduate and graduate students. Our campus administration is aware of the housing problem and the housing costs.

Question 3: This was an open-ended question for them to indicate what they wanted the campus administration to hear. I am in the process of categorizing those answers and will share those results either at our next meeting or in the fall.

Any questions?

Housing is an issue in Knoxville.

D. Thompson: the campus administration is working with private companies to look at options for building additional housing and making easier access for our students to find housing. I know our Vice Chancellor for Student Life as well as our Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration are working with city officials as well as private companies to look for solutions. Our administrators are really working to try and find solutions.

Housing is a huge problem, especially with visiting scholars and those who are here on a short-term basis. But, we still have to think about those graduate student fees and to continue to try and raise our stipends. I just lost a top graduate recruit to Michigan State. He was offered \$38,000.00 stipend and they found a job for his partner. Our competition is racing to the finish line.

D. Thompson: I understand.

Graduate Student Senate Update (Hunter Hammock, GSS President)

- Before I begin my report, I want to share that on a smaller scale, GSS also surveyed students in both the fall and the spring. Our results fall closely in line with the data Dr. Thompson presented. Across the entire year, the number one issue for our graduate and professional students is financial struggles. Some of the stories I have heard this year is heartbreaking. I want to make sure all our students have the best experience possible. One issue that Mohamed and I have fought for this semester is lobbying to increase the base graduate student stipends. As Dr. Ownley mentioned, if we are not able to offer competitive stipends, we are going to get out competed by other universities. I think the University of Tennessee has an opportunity in the southeast, if we can increase the stipends by a bare minimum to the level of inflation. This would help our students and I believe will make us competitive. This would also be an investment worth making because of the role that the teaching assistants and research assistants serve on campus.
- GSS transition. The transition for the new GSS administration is about 2 months out. I am very excited about all the accomplishments we have had during our tenure. And, I'm excited to finish out the year on a strong note. Some of our accomplishments include:
 - The social reconnection of the graduate student body.
 - The lobbying for increased stipends.
 - Trying to secure equal representation for the graduate students in comparison to undergraduates. This campus is very undergraduate focused. We want to make sure we are in alignment with the SGA and the Faculty Senate so that we share an equal voice. And together with SGA serve as a combined voice for all UT students.
 - We advocated for the graduate and professional students' well-being – for the physical, mental, emotional, social and financial. I believe all of these tie together, to where if we can help identify and solve the financial issue that it will help with mental health and the standard of living issues that we

have seen. Obviously, this is a very complex situation. The inflation and housing market as previously mentioned is something we will have to combat with.

- One of our major accomplishments this year is we approved updates to the constitution and bylaws for GSS. Significant updates with language and to make it a working document that will serve GSS for the next 10 to 15 years.
- GSS Coordinator: Mohamed and I believe we have helped to set GSS up for success by participating on the search to hire a GSS Coordinator. To have a person solely dedication to GSS and as an advocate for GSS is very exciting for the future.
- Graduate and Professional Student Appreciation Week (GPSAW) – April 4-8
 - Reception: During GPSAW week we will have a reception and awards ceremony on Wednesday, April 6, at 5:30 p.m. This will be after the 3MT event. What better way to recognize the achievements and accomplishments of our graduate and professional students and show them we really appreciate them and their work than to recognize and award them for those achievements. We will advertise the reception on social media and in other ways so that we can begin accepting nominations for the awards.
 - 5K River Run/Walk: Set for Saturday, April 9 from 9:30 to 1:00 p.m., at Cherokee Park. Proceeds from the event will go to the Big Orange Pantry and the GSS event fund. We have 43 participants that have signed up. This is available for all ages. Donations can be submitted if you don't want to participate. We also invite you to come and show support for GSS.
- The GSS Travel Awards and the Academic Support Awards are still open and I highly encourage you to communicate this to your respective units. I want to make sure students are aware of these awards and to encourage them to apply for them to get some financial assistance.
- GSS elections. The election process is open, and we are seeking nominations now.
- Upcoming Basic Needs Event on April 13, 4-6 PM, Strong Hall, Room 101. Join the Student Basic Needs Coalition (SBNC) and Graduate Student Senate (GSS) as we learn from Dr. Antonio Duran in "*Exploring Intersectionality's Potential to Examine Students' Experiences of Basic Needs Insecurity*." Join us and learn more about how to address basic needs insecurities in higher education while enjoying a fun mix and mingle with students across campus. A social networking event will follow immediately after with pizza (first come, first served).
- I am extremely happy with the progress that our team has made. I have been surrounded with so many great people and truly honored to have worked with the high level of people around us. I am just really thankful to have had the opportunity to serve as the GSS President. I appreciate the support of Graduate Council. Any questions?

S. Ohnesorg:

Thank you, Hunter, for your report and for the excellent work GSS has accomplished this year.

Graduate Council Chair (Stefanie Ohnesorg)

We will review the nomination for chair-elect. I turn this over to our nominating committee, Laurie Meschke, and thank her for the work on this committee.

L. Meschke

I want to thank everyone who was so gracious when I reached out. It is clear from those that I spoke with how dedicated to Graduate Council you are and gave my request careful consideration. I am very pleased to present Nathan Preuss as the candidate for our next chair-elect. Nathan's vita was shared with the agenda, so you have had the opportunity to read it. I did not know until I read his vita, that Nathan is currently in a PhD program. At this time, we also invite the opportunity to bring a name forward or to self-nominate. With no other nominations coming forward, we will now vote for Nathan Preuss as the next chair-elect.

Motion moved and seconded to vote on our nominee, Nathan Preuss, as the next chair-elect. With no further discussion, we will launch the poll to vote.

Vote was unanimous. Nathan Preuss is our next chair-elect.

Excellent. Thank you and much gratitude to Nathan for accepting this responsibility. You will bring new energy in this leadership position.

S. Ohnesorg

Thank you again, Lori, for your work on the selection process. And, congratulations and thank you Nathan for stepping up to the occasion.

Are there any items from the floor? With no items from the floor. I will share my closing remarks.

It is exciting to hear that Curriculog is coming. This will make the curriculum process more transparent and hopefully easier. I know many are working very hard to make this a smooth transition.

Faculty Senate is collecting data concerning the faculty responses to the new calendar that was announced. I had asked for those on Graduate Council that had questions to send me an email with those questions. I thank those of you that sent me your questions and concerns. If anyone else would like to share your thoughts, please send those to me in an email by Monday as I plan to send that information to Lou Gross by the first of next week.

Any questions for me today. With none, I will close by saying our next and last Graduate Council Meeting for this academic year is on April 28. Thank you, Council members, for attending today's meeting.

With no further business, the meeting adjourned at 3:50 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Cox
Graduate Council Liaison